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"Libraries as Acts of Civic Renewal"

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Happy Fourth of July to you all!

Distinguished Guests:
As people who appreciate writers, books and libraries you may have heard the story about Charles Dickens' fake books, but please indulge me a moment to retell it. In 1851, Dickens moved into Tavistock House, the home of his dreams in Dublin. To insure the privacy of his study, he had the doorway camouflaged with shelves of dummy books so that it disappeared into the adjacent library's wall of bookshelves. Poking fun at libraries and, for that matter, humanity, Dickens gave his fake books some wry titles. One was called *Cat's Live*s (in nine volumes, of course). Another, called *The History of a Short Chancery Suit,* sprawling over 21 volumes. Another set of books, *The Wisdom of Our Ancestors,* included the titles *Ignorance, Superstition, Dirt, Disease, The Block and The Stake. The Virtues of Our Ancestors,* however, was so slender that the title was printed sideways on the spine. Then there was a three-volume magnus opus entitled *Five Minutes in China…*

Tonight, I am deeply honored to be here in Kansas City to talk about real books and the importance of public libraries. I also want to pay tribute to you for building a magnificent new main library. I understand that, once you finish restoring this edifice in the Greco-Roman style, it will virtually be a temple to honor knowledge—doubling the number of library holdings accessible to the public, providing space for exhibitions, recitals, lectures and, as if all that were not sufficiently stimulating, a place for a café on the mezzanine floor. With many others here tonight, I too believe the new library will grace the city, help stimulate a downtown renaissance and—most, most importantly—be better able to play its central role in the cultural, intellectual and democratic life of the entire metropolitan community. To the extent that citizens see that statement as novel or far-fetched—is, from my experience—a rough gauge of the challenge you face in transforming public appreciation into active political support—the kind of support needed for the library to become a regional project, steaming with civic pride and fueling the engine of urban and metropolitan renewal.

That Kansas City faces a major challenge is suggested by the recent report on the region by the urban affairs specialists Curtis Johnson and Neal Pierce.

These authors mention the library—which serves more than two million citizens a year—only in passing. The well-intended authors did not even include the library in their map of the area's "assets." To be sure, the map's purpose is to highlight the distance and disconnection between major resources—but looked at another way, the map serves as a graphic display of the need for the library to become, in effect, the mind of this urban body that sprawls mindlessly across state borders and a dozen county lines. The Kansas City Library, after all, is the most natural, capable and democratic institution for centering and connecting these diverse communities through the free and open provision of information, entertainment, culture and knowledge.

Kansas City is joining other cities in rediscovering the importance of libraries as the communities' institutional minds and hearts. New main libraries have recently been built or renovated in San Antonio, Phoenix, Denver, San Francisco, Sacramento and Portland, Oregon. The Chicago Public Library is completing one of the world's largest public library capital improvement programs, which includes 13 new construction projects and the renovation or replacement of most of its branch libraries.

Overall, last year, 80 more libraries were built and 132 were renovated, bringing the nation's investment in library improvements close to $4 billion since the mid-1990s, according to the American Library Association. The association says we have more than 16,000 free public libraries, or more sources for books and computers than McDonald's has franchises for Happy Meals. And, believe it or not, Americans go to libraries more than twice as often as they go to the movies. In the last year, as the economy slowed, library visits also increased by 8.3 percent. Yet the cost of using the library works out to only about $23 a year for the average taxpayer.

One reason for their popularity is that our libraries are continually expanding and enriching their services. In Kansas City, 4th to 12th grade students can receive help with homework from online tutors. In St. Louis, Missouri, "cybermobiles" bring the Internet and online reference services into many neighborhoods. In Philadelphia, the Free Library faxes articles and other information to homes and offices. In Detroit, you can obtain a copy of a patent far more quickly than from the U.S. Patent Office. In San Francisco, the new library provides 400 electronic work stations and has capacity for 700 more.

Libraries are leading the effort to close the digital divide, as nearly every public library provides free access to the Internet; in fact, libraries are the number one point of online access for people who lack computers and Internet accounts.

In the main, libraries have shown remarkable resilience in the face of repeated challenges to their viability and a remarkable ability to transform themselves to meet changing needs. They continue to adapt to one of the most astonishing shifts in the technology of communication ever to take place: the rapidly spreading use of networked computers bringing vast amounts of information and misinformation directly to the home, school and office. The breathtaking pace of these developments has led some proponents of the Internet to wonder whether brick-and-mortar libraries are any longer relevant. Never fear. Libraries have always found a way to fit new media to their fundamental purposes and become indispensable.

Not surprisingly, nearly all Americans surveyed by Gallup in 1998 said libraries would be needed in the future, despite the increased availability of information from the computer.

At the same time, we must deal with the reality that libraries are often taken for granted and their significance as living institutions is sometimes forgotten.

This was certainly the case in New York in the late 1970s, when Andew Heiskell became chairman of the New York Public Library's board of directors and recruited me to become president in 1981. In describing the challenges the library faced back then, he writes: "When I first signed up to help the New York Public Library, it had almost no reputation left to protect. During the 1970s, New York City came so close to bankruptcy that it had to cut back on everything. It cut back savagely on funds for

the library because in those days the library had no political clout. It had no constituency except scholars, children and ordinary citizens who liked to read.…The city cut back so hard on the library that some of the branches were open only eight hours a week. Some librarians had to scurry from building to building trying to service three branches in one week. The marble inside the main Fifth Avenue building, the one with the great sculpted lions guarding the broad front steps, was so filthy brown that you would never guess it was marble….

"The chandeliers and lighting fixtures all through the main building were dirty and had only two or three bulbs in each. The beautiful Celeste Bartos Forum, now the library's most important meeting place, had been turned into a warehouse. The gorgeous Gottesman Exhibition Hall had been divided by Masonite partitions into tiny offices for personnel and accounting. The only decent room in the entire building was the board room, but even there the tall curtains fell apart if you touched them….Inside this building were more than three million books, many of them extremely valuable, gathering dust and crumbling away in stacks that were not air-conditioned. The library had begged for air conditioning for 20 years, but nothing happened."

That is the way it was: under-funded, under-appreciated and with many of its 100 buildings falling apart and inadequately staffed. The library's constituents—as library constituents almost everywhere—were unorganized and not vocal. As a result, politicians took it for granted that the libraries were not priorities and that library budgets could be slashed with impunity.

To meet the library's needs, we produced a wish list that would cost $1 billion.

To be realistic, we scaled the list down to $307 million worth of top-priority items.

When we announced a capital fund campaign, there were exclamations of disbelief, but five years later, the goal was exceeded with public and private funds—not to mention more than $50 million worth of donated equipment, services and other in-kind gifts. We were able to increase the endowment, collections, hours, and services for both research libraries and branch libraries. But I was most proud to witness the library's revival as the "people's palace"—reaffirming its central place in the city's civic and cultural life.

It wasn't easy, of course. Early on, a major challenge was to mobilize all segments of society to support the library's renewal by reminding them that libraries are necessities, not luxuries. As part of the effort to get this message out, we strengthened the library's departments for government relations and public relations. We told our story everywhere, to officials in the city, state, and federal governments as well as to countless organizations, foundations and individual philanthropists. Instead of asking for small sums, as had been done in past, we asked for very big sums, noting that other, equally deserving cultural institutions had traditionally received much more support than the library. We showed that the library was not an isolated, passive institution but an active one with a lot of impact.

After all, the library is not a book warehouse, but a educational institution—and we underscored that role by holding lecture series, exhibitions and celebrations for writers and cultural figures whose creations, records and books were in the library.

We computerized holdings, helping to democratize access to information and knowledge.

Whenever we could, we demonstrated that libraries mean education, libraries mean consolation, libraries mean culture and libraries mean jobs. We stressed that libraries are not only for the poor, the helpless and children without books. Rather, we showed that the libraries were for the benefit of the entire society—helping all the educational institutions, all the professions and all the businesses. We pointed out that the library's vast repository of information and knowledge was constantly being tapped by just about any industry you can think of, including advertising, film and television. Lawyers use the patent collections extensively, reporters use the periodicals department, airlines use the maps department, families look up genealogical records.

We were gratified that we were successful in building coalitions and making joint public/private partnerships and agreements on how money would be spent.

By the mid-1980s, our media campaigns were generating more than 3,000 mentions a year in the national media.

We encountered criticism, but that is to be expected. We were, for example, criticized for spending money to clean the main library. We felt the money was well spent because we wanted to show off the building, to reawaken civic pride in what was built to be a magnificent tribute to the people and city of New York, the state and the nation. We wanted restore its luster as the people's palace, because we believed that democracy and excellence are not mutually exclusive. We were also criticized for opening a library gift shop and for having social events and fundraisers at the public library. But these activities are in line with the library's role at the center of the city's cultural life. During my years at the library, we honored more than 175 authors, ranging from Renata Adler to Herman Wouk. We celebrated them at Literary Lions Dinners once a year, catered right in the restored reading rooms of the library.

Twenty-one authors dined with library patrons at 21 tables, for which sponsors had contributed $10,000 to $25,000 each. The authors signed and gave away copies of their books, which their publishers donated. After dinner, we often had an actor perform a dramatic reading of a literary work.

But we didn't rely entirely on the social elite; every year, for example, we held a two-day holiday party to welcome citizens to their library, thank them for their support and encourage their contributions.

But supporting the library is a never-ending struggle, so librarians can't be shy about tooting their own horn. This year, New York City is again having major financial problems and the mayor proposed a 15 percent reduction in library funding—even as demand for library services grew. In 2001, library visits had increased by 12 percent and book circulation had increased by 19 percent over the prior year. Arguing against the reduction—in an editorial I myself could not have written any better—*The New York Times* called for the city to find money to—quote—"soften the blow to one of the most vital, well-loved parts of city government." Thanks to greater public awareness and support for the library, the blow was ultimately softened, to a 6.5 percent reduction.

Across America we are coming to realize the library's unsurpassed importance as a civic institution. The library contains a society's collective but discriminating memory. It is an act of honor to the past, a witness to the future, hence a visible judgment on both.

In our democratic society, the library stands for hope, for learning, for progress, for literacy, for self-improvement and for civic engagement. The library is a symbol of opportunity, citizenship, equality, freedom of speech and freedom of thought, and hence, is a symbol for democracy itself. It is a critical component in the free exchange of information, which is at the heart of our democracy. In both an actual and symbolic sense, the library is the guardian of freedom of thought and freedom of choice; hence it constitutes the best symbol of the First Amendment to our Constitution.

We must not forget the library's critical role in dispelling ignorance about our nation's history and the ideals, traditions and purposes of our democracy. "A nation that expects to be ignorant and free," warned Thomas Jefferson, "expects what never was and never will be."

The free library is, in the words of Andrew Carnegie, "the cradle of democracy," and he backed up that belief by building 1,681 public libraries in nearly as many American communities and another 828 libraries abroad. I should mention that my fellow educators—librarians, information scientists and all communicators of culture and creators of knowledge—continue to rock this cradle of democracy, even as it moves into cyberspace.

Libraries contain the heritage of humanity, the record of its triumphs and failures, its intellectual, scientific and artistic achievements and its collective memory. They are a source of knowledge, scholarship and wisdom. They are an institution, withal, where the left and the right, God and the Devil, are together classified and retained, in order to teach us what to emulate and what not to repeat.

Libraries are, thus, the most tolerant institutions we have, the good and the evil are here, and the library makes no value judgments about them. As the poet Richard Armour writes, libraries are where people "lower their voices and raise their minds."

By seeing so many examples in libraries, by comparing and knowing about right and wrong, one comes to appreciate shades in history, nuances in history, possibilities and limitations. As a result, one becomes more able to understand other people's positions, knowing how arduously they have come to those positions, even though they may be wrong.

Libraries are as old as civilization, the object of pride, envy and sometimes, senseless destruction throughout the ages.

The renowned library at Alexandria, Egypt, was the first institution based on the premise that all the world's knowledge could be gathered under one roof. It was founded by in about 300 B.C. by Ptolemy I, who sent agents to all the cities of Asia, North Africa and Europe to collect copies of all books that existed in the known world. The library, and its 700,000 volumes, was destroyed in the seventh century A.D. But for nine luminous centuries, Alexandria was a place of inspiration, a symbol

of the unity of knowledge and scholarship and of the limitless potential of human advancement.

Between the clay tablets of ancient Babylon and the computers of a modern library stretch more than 5,000 years of man's and woman's insatiable desire to ensure their immortality through the written word or symbol.

Instinctively, we want to transmit the fruits of culture and civilization, and to share memory, experience, wisdom, fantasy, and longing with the whole of humankind and with future generations.

The modern library allows one to go five thousand years into the past to try to cope with the present—and also to imagine, to fantasize about the future. It gives you a sense of the cosmic relation to the totality of humanity, but at the same time a sense of isolation. Here is the human endeavor, human aspiration, human agony, human ecstasy, human bravura, human failures, all before you. Humanity has gone through dreadful horrors, dreadful turmoil, varied glories. How do we distill the past? How do we retain the memories? Libraries.

One gets thrilled and frightened at the same time in the presence of a library. During the past 20 years, with the advent of the computer age, we have been undergoing another historical revolutionary shift equal to that of previous revolutionary changes. The computer—with its gain in portability, capability, ease, orderliness, accuracy, reliability and information storage capacity—supersedes anything achievable by pen scribbling, typewriting and cabinet filing, and is recognized by all.

The new information technologies are the driving force behind the explosion of information and the fragmentation of knowledge that we witness today. We are told that all available information doubles every three years and yet, we are able only to use less than ten percent of the available information.

The information technologies have shrunk the traditional barriers of time and space, giving us the ability to record, organize and quickly communicate vast amounts of information. Today the entire corpus of Greek and Latin literature can fit on a CD-ROM and be carried inconspicuously in a jacket pocket. We face, for the first time in history of mankind, the ability of providing each and every individual his or her own Library of Alexandria.

The greatest challenge facing us today is how to organize information into structured knowledge. We must rise above the obsession with quantity of information and the speed of transmission. We must focus on the fact that the key issue for us is our ability to organize the information once it has been amassed, to assimilate it, to find meaning in it and to assure its survival. And that cannot be done without librarians and libraries.

In the decade ahead, our democracy and our society will be facing a major challenge. Many, in our society, will have access to information and knowledge—and hence access to power; the power of autonomy, power of enlightenment, power of self-improvement and self-assertion, and power over their lives and their families' future. And there will be others who will have no access to information.

Such a cleavage will have tremendous consequences on the future of our nation. Our nation cannot afford to have one-fifth of its population being illiterate. For reading is a means to education; education is a means to knowledge; knowledge is a means to power and a bright future. Those who learn to read and write do so not only for themselves and their families, but our nation as well. They learn in order to become good citizens and good ancestors. That is why reading and the love of libraries and books has to begin in the earliest stages of education. School libraries constitute an indispensable introduction to literacy and learning about the world and the universe. They are pathways to self-discovery. They are tools for progress and autonomy.

Even in this age of the computer and information revolution, microchips, lasers, fiber optics, and other technological elaborations, the raw input is still human speech, human idiosyncrasy and literacy. Libraries are still indispensable tools. They provide pleasure, discretion, silence, creative solitude, and privacy. Reading universalizes us, especially now when the computer has brought us the death of distance.

The library, then, is the University of Universities, the symbol of our universal community, of the unity of all knowledge, of the commonwealth of learning. It is the only true and free university there is. In this university there are no entrance examinations, no subsequent examinations, no diplomas, no graduation. Ralph Waldo Emerson had it right when he called the library the People's University. By the same token, no university in the world has ever risen to greatness without having a great library, and no university is greater than its library, and no city is greater than its library.

That is because, I believe, libraries represent and embody the spirit of humanity, a spirit that has been extolled throughout history by countless writers, artists, scholars, philosophers, theologians, scientists, teachers and ordinary men and women in a myriad of tongues and dialects.

Above all else, the library constitutes an act of faith in the continuity of life. The library is not, therefore, an ossified institution or a historical relic.

Together with the museum, the library is the DNA of our culture. Libraries are the mirror held up to the face of humankind, the diary and textbook of the human race.

The existence and the welfare of the library are of paramount importance in the life of a society, in the life of a community, the life of a university, the life of a school and a college, the life of a city and the life of a nation.

But libraries are more than repositories of past human endeavor, they are instruments of civilization. They are a laboratory of human aspiration, a window to the future and a wellspring of action. They are a source of intellectual growth, and hope. In this land and everywhere on earth, they are a medium of progress, autonomy, empowerment, independence and self-determination. They have always provided—and I would suggest, always will provide—a place and space for imaginative recreation, for imaginative rebirth. That is because the library is a transcendent institution, being able to surpass the limitations of time and space. The library is an oasis, a place for reflection, for contemplation, for privacy, for the renewal of one's imagination and the development of one's mind.

Libraries are vehicles for self-renewal.
In his book, *Love in the Time of Cholera,* Gabriel Garcia Marquez speaks of the conviction that human beings are not born once and for all on the day their mothers give birth to them, but that life obliges them to give birth to themselves over and over again. This is also true of libraries. They have to renew themselves because information is constantly changing and knowledge is constantly being renewed. And the same could be said about cities: they are not created once and for all time, but must recreate themselves to survive and thrive.

I would like close by congratulating you once more for your support and your work on behalf of the library, the downtown and the region—for the rebirth of the library in its refurbished Greco-Roman temple is an extremely good omen for America and Americans everywhere.

Thank you very much.

The end